

ANTI-UNTOUCHABILITY LAW IN RURAL INDIA: SOCIAL IMPACT AND STRATEGIES FOR FURTHER REFORM

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Abstract

One major stride towards the abolition of caste-based discrimination was the Anti-Untouchability Law, which was enacted under the Untouchability Offences Act (1955). The law aimed to eliminate untouchability practices and promote equality, which was inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the chief author of the Indian Constitution and a passionate advocate for Dalit rights. However, due to deep-rooted caste stereotypes, untouchability still prevails, especially in rural areas.

There were four major groups in Indian society, which included Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. The Shudras were considered "untouchables," and they were the lowest group. These people were subjected to strict political, religious, social, and economic restrictions. Since they were considered polluting to the upper castes, they were often assigned "impure" jobs such as manual labour and rubbish disposal.

They were excluded from access to community gatherings, public water supplies, and temples. Millions were deeply affected by such a system of caste-based social separation. This system of untouchability is, to this day, a serious problem in rural India despite constitutional prohibitions.

The weak enforcement of laws such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, continues to hinder progress in the fight against caste violence and untouchability.

This would mean the education of all children, including the children from the upper-caste family. The environment and family values of children make a huge difference in their lives, especially if they are born and brought up in rural settings. Education of respect, equality, and the destructive power of discrimination would help us to build an egalitarian society that would, in turn, assist future generations to reject the prejudice of caste-based discrimination. Such education can remove outmoded ideas and usher in societal progress.

The ongoing practice of untouchability in rural India will be examined in this research paper, along with its causes, effects, and necessary measures to eradicate it.

Introduction

Untouchability" is a social practice of exclusion, discrimination, and dehumanization of people or groups of people considered "impure" or "polluting" by the

traditional Hindu caste system. People classified as "untouchables" in the present live as Dalits or Scheduled Castes were denied participation in public resources, religious sanctuaries, and fundamental human

rights in the past. Untouchability is not simply a matter of physical contact but involves all manner of social, economic, and psychological prohibitions designed to uphold caste order and "purity."

Untouchability has been the most recurring social ill in Indian society, deeply ingrained in the caste system. Although constitutionally abolished by Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, and although there have been robust legal instruments such as the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, caste-based discrimination still impacts millions of individuals, particularly in rural India. In most villages, Dalits and other marginalized groups continue to be denied access to public spaces on a par with others, are socially boycotted, humiliated, and subjected to violence. The laws, although strong on paper, do not succeed in reaching and protecting the vulnerable because of inadequate implementation, ignorance of laws, and ingrained social stigma. This article intends to research the efficacy of anti-untouchability legislation in rural India, evaluate their real social outcome, and provide actionable and community focused approaches to make these legislations more than just text on paper India boasts a strong legal system for safeguarding human dignity and social justice. However, the ground reality in most rural areas is different. Even after decades of efforts, untouchability continues to be practiced in direct and indirect ways in temples, schools, water bodies, and even social gatherings. Rural areas especially see subtle but damaging practices that keep the caste system alive.

I picked this subject because I feel that genuine equality cannot be established with the help of laws alone, but by their effective execution and a transformation of mindsets. On my personal trips and observations to rural areas, I realized that most people are either unaware of their rights or are scared to express themselves.

Even in the presence of stringent legal provisions to safeguard Scheduled Caste communities, rape cases of Dalit girls and women are still common in various villages in India. They not just demonstrate caste-related discrimination but also the entrenched problem of power disparity, gender inequality, and institutional failure.

In most cases, the victims do not get justice in time. Police officials are usually hesitant to file FIRs, make proper investigations, or initiate prompt action against the accused, particularly when the accused are of the dominant castes. In some ghastly situations, there are instances of reports where bodies of SC girl victims were burnt by the authorities at their convenience without prior consent of their families, prompting severe concerns regarding violation of human rights, destruction of evidence, and deprivation of justice.

These incidents demonstrate how the law, despite being good-intentioned, is quite helpless without proper implementation, accountability, and sensitivity at the grassroots level. These actual cases have had a deep impact on my choice of topic to study. I wish to investigate not only the social implications of anti-untouchability laws but also the pressing necessity for reforms in the legal procedure, police functionality, and public awareness particularly in rural areas where the voice of the marginalized never gets heard.

Objective

- 1 .To research the historical context and constitutional evolution pertaining to untouchability.
2. To assess the implementation and efficacy of anti-untouchability legislation in rural India.
3. To analyze the present scenario of caste-based discrimination in the countryside.
4. To delve into real-life issues confronted by Dalit communities, particularly women and girls.

5. To ascertain loopholes in legal awareness and access to justice amongst marginalised communities.

6. To examine the role of law enforcement and judiciary in cases of caste-based crime.

7. To advise strategies and legal reforms to ensure greater implementation and social effect

Historical Background of Untouchability in India

Ancient India

In the ancient period, Indian society was structured around the varna system, dividing people into four main groups Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Those excluded from this hierarchy were labeled as “untouchables” or Avarnas and were relegated to menial and degrading tasks. They suffered severe social discrimination, including restrictions on temple entry, use of public resources, and access to education. Religious texts and Dharmashastras reinforced these caste-based divisions, embedding untouchability into the social fabric for centuries⁴⁰¹

Medieval times

In the medieval era, untouchability continued to exist in society under different empires and kingdoms. While saints of the Bhakti movement like Kabir and Ravidas spoke out against caste-based discrimination and advocated spiritual equality, they had a greater impact on religious thought than engendering substantial structural or social change.⁴⁰²

Colonial Era (British rule)

During the colonial era, British domination further consolidated caste divisions by formalizing caste identities through censuses and legal systems. Although there were few legislative attempts to enhance access to

public spaces for Dalits, actual social change was slow. This period, however, witnessed the emergence of powerful social reformers such as Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who fought tooth and nail for the rights and dignity of marginalized groups. Dr. Ambedkar's effort was especially influential, as he advocated legal protections for Dalits and advocated for separate electorates to represent them politically⁴⁰³

Freedom Movement Period

During the period of the Freedom Movement, the question of untouchability had become a primary issue in India's struggle for independence. Mahatma Gandhi was at the forefront of calling attention to the condition of the so-called 'untouchables', whom he called Harijans or "children of God". He aimed to morally rehabilitate Hindu society by appealing to conscience and advancing social inclusion through efforts such as the Harijan Sevak Sangh. Gandhi thought that untouchability was a sin against man and a stain on Hinduism, and therefore sought to eradicate it through spiritual rebirth, self-purification, and voluntary modification of social attitudes. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, born himself of an untouchable caste, tackled the issue from a radically different angle. He perceived untouchability as a structural social injustice based on religious and legal frameworks, and advocated its abolition through constitutional safeguards, legal rights, and political representation. Ambedkar insisted on separate electorates for Dalits during the Poona Pact negotiations and was instrumental in establishing the basis for future legal safeguards for Scheduled Castes. His focus was on structural change, education, and legal empowerment, not just moral reform. While Gandhi's approach was rooted in social harmony and ethical transformation, Ambedkar's focus was on justice, equality, and institutional change. Despite their ideological differences, both leaders brought the issue of

⁴⁰¹ Patrick Olivelle, *Manu Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Manava - Dharmashastra* (Oxford university press 2005)

⁴⁰² Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essay on the Ambedkar Movement* (Manohar 2001) 10-15

⁴⁰³ Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Class in India* (University of California press 1984) 23-27

caste oppression and untouchability to the forefront of the Indian national movement, paving the way for future constitutional and legal reforms after independence⁴⁰⁴

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative method will be employed that involves the study of secondary data. The secondary data comprises published books, articles, reports, and legal papers on caste-based discrimination and the effect of anti-untouchability legislation in rural India. This method will allow for a thorough understanding of the topic through the study of available literature on untouchability, legal change, and mass movements.⁴⁰⁵

Data will be collected from primary sources like academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, and legal documents. These sources will provide significant information regarding the persistence of caste-based discrimination, the role of legal instruments like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, and the role of grassroots Dalit movements in rural India⁴⁰⁶

The analysis of the data will comprise a thematic analysis of the findings, with emergent themes like legal enforcement, social exclusion, grassroots activism, and discrimination on the basis of caste. Based on the reading and synthesis of findings from all the sources, the study shall attempt to establish a clear indication of the impact of legal reforms and the persistence of challenges facing Dalits in rural India. Besides, there will be a comparative study of the regional variation in the expression of untouchability and the efficacy of legal reforms in different states of India. The findings will be compared to comprehend gaps in implementation, challenges in reaching social

justice, and the local movement's role in pushing legal and social transformations.

Legal Implementation of Anti-Untouchability Laws

Despite constitutional measures and legislation like the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955) and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989), the implementation of anti-untouchability law in rural India still remains extremely poor. There are several reports and studies, like Singh (2019) and Human Rights Watch (2018), that cite that caste discrimination and violence are still prevalent, particularly in rural areas where the traditional social structure is maintained in a strict manner.⁴⁰⁷ The police authorities are typically not ready to file the complaints under appropriate legal sections, and even where cases are filed, their acquittal rate is high owing to poor investigation, political pressure, and intimidation of the victims.

Grassroots Dalit movements have consistently identified the absence of accountability among police and administrative personnel as a hindrance to the delivery of justice. Jaffrelot (2003) explains that while political representation has improved for lower castes, legal empowerment is hampered by social prejudice and bureaucratic lethargy. Additionally, Singh (2019) suggests that most Dalits are unaware of their rights under the law, and the absence of legal literacy further minimizes the effectiveness of protective legislation.⁴⁰⁸

Though the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act was amended in 2015 and 2018 to make legal protections stronger, including adding additional punishable offences and special court provisions, enforcement varies unevenly between states. For instance, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have high rates of caste violence but low convictions, which shows a disconnect between

⁴⁰⁴ Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Sage Publication 1994)

⁴⁰⁵ Anupama Raa, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (University of California Press 2009)

⁴⁰⁶ Government of India, National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) Report, Various year <http://ncrb.gov.in> accessed 18 April 2025

⁴⁰⁷ Suraj Yengde and Anand Teltumbde, *Caste Matters: Contemporary Dalit Politics* (Navayana 2018); Human Rights Watch, "Hidden Apartheid": Caste Discrimination against India's "Untouchables" (HRW 2007)

⁴⁰⁸ KS Singh, *The Schedule Castes* (Oxford University press 2019)

law and actual implementation. Thus, the study indicates that mere presence of anti-untouchability legislation is not sufficient. Political will, social consciousness, administrative responsibility, and grassroots legal activism are needed to make legal enforcement effective so that Dalits in rural India get real protection under the law.⁴⁰⁹

Notwithstanding constitutional provisions and legal safeguards, social exclusion based on caste continues to pervasively impact Dalit communities, especially in rural India. As testified by Shyam Lal (1992) and Human Rights Watch (2018), Dalits remain excluded from accessing public resources like water, education, temples, and housing. Such exclusion is usually enforced through simple village-level caste councils and societal norms inhibiting inter-caste contact. In most villages, Dalits reside in separate hamlets and are systematically excluded from social and economic opportunities.

This exclusion is not just physical but symbolic and psychological in nature, whereby Dalits are considered inferior and their dignity is withheld. Despite affirmative action measures, according to Teltumbde (2020), Dalits continue to be relegated in the areas of employment and education on account of entrenched caste prejudices. Singh (2019) points out that in the countryside, caste still determines access to justice, power, and opportunity, and most Dalits continue to suffer from systemic neglect and invisibility. These trends signal that social untouchability has not been uprooted but has been reconstituted as more refined, contemporary patterns of exclusion.

Role of State Authorities and Implementation Gaps

The state's intervention in combating caste-based discrimination is pivotal but frequently inadequate. As argued by Jaffrelot (2003) and Teltumbde (2020), the gap between lawmaking

and law enforcement is huge⁴¹⁰. Laws are in place to safeguard Dalits, but their enforcement hinges on the will and integrity of local officials—police, judiciary, and administrative personnel—many of whom themselves function within caste systems.

Government reports and independent research have uncovered regular lapses in recording First Information Reports (FIRs) under sections of the SC/ST Act, delayed prosecution, and acquittal rates. State machinery usually fails to ensure timely compensation or protection to victims of atrocities. In addition, political expediency tends to result in lack of accountability and unwillingness to act against perpetrators from the upper castes.

Teltumbde (2020) contends that with the influence of Hindutva and neoliberal politics, the state has grown less concerned with caste-based woes. The disconnect between policy and practice stems from the lack of commitment to transformative justice and systemic weakness. If state machinery is not reformed and sensitized, even legal reforms cannot guarantee Dalits their rights and respect.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁹ Ministry of Home Affairs, National Crime Records Bureau: Crime in India Report (2015-2020) <http://ncrb.gov.in> accessed 18 April 2025

⁴¹⁰ Christophe Jaffrelot, India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India (Permanent Black 2003); Anand Teltumbde, Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva (Navayana 2020).

⁴¹¹ Ministry of Home Affairs, National Crime Records Bureau: Crime in India Report 2020 <https://ncrb.gov.in> accessed 18 April 2025.

Documented Incidents of Caste-B Documented Reports of Caste-Based Violence in Indian Villages

Village Name	State	Year	Incident Description	Educational context	Police/state response
Vachathi	Tamil Nadu		A joint team of official raided the tribal village, ransacked homes assaulted villagers, and raped 18 women	Limited access to education contributed to vulnerability	25 official convicted in 201 under the sc/st act
Kodiyankulam	Tamil Nadu		Police raided the Dalits villages, destroying property and assaulting residents.	Higher literacy rate; many women held degrees.	Commission claimed no police excess leading to criticism
Pararia	Bihar	1998	Police gang raped women from 26 families; assaulted male residents	Limited educational opportunities ; systemic discrimination	All accused released in 1989.
Hathras	Uttar Pradesh	2020	Dalit woman gang raped ; died; body cremated without consent.	Victim faced barriers to education	Police delayed report; attempted to downplay the incident
Una	Gujarat	2016	Seven Dalits men flogged for skinning a dead cow	Dalits faced segregation sand limited mobility .	43 individual arrested; sparked nationwide

Tsundur	Andhra Pradesh	1991	Eight Dalits men massacred by reddy caste members.	Victims from mala community striving for education	All accused eventually acquitted
Kalapatti	Tamil Nadu	2004	Mob attacked Dalits settlement; burned bouse and assaulted residents	Dalits faced educational restriction and temples entry denial	Police accused of evidence suppression

The table compiles significant caste violence cases in India from 1988 to 2020, illustrating how discrimination based on caste, poor education levels, and ineffective police/state intervention keep Dalit groups at risk.

1. In Vachathi (1992), 18 Dalit women were raped in a police operation, yet justice was postponed, with 215 officers being convicted years after the fact.⁴¹²
2. In Kodyankulam (1995), police beat up Dalits, while even greater education levels in the area did not prevent institutional prejudice from causing the case to be dropped.⁴¹³
3. At Pararia (1988), the police gang-raped women and a lack of education and the complicity of the police held back justice.⁴¹⁴
4. The Hathras (2020) involved the brutal gang rape and forced cremation against family wishes of a Dalit woman, and roadblocks to education and inaction by the police revealed underlying flaws.⁴¹⁵

5. Una (2016) involved Dalit men beaten with sticks for skinned carcass of dead cow, triggering outrage but sluggish justice⁴¹⁶

6. . Tsundur (1991) saw eight Dalit men massacred, with caste prejudice affecting the acquittal of the perpetrators.

Finally, at Kalapatti (2004), Dalit houses were set on fire, with police evidence being suppressed. These events emphasize the convergence of caste violence, educational obstacles, and institutional shortcomings, highlighting the necessity for change in law enforcement, education, and judicial structures to safe

⁴¹² State v S.P. Bhuvaneshwari and Others (Vachathi Case), Special Court Judgment, Cuddalore District (2011); Human Rights Watch, "Broken System: Dysfunction, Abuse, and Impunity in the Indian Police" (2018) <https://www.hrw.org> accessed 18 April 2025.

⁴¹³ Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine S. Newman, *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination and Social Exclusion in Modern India* (OUP 2010)

⁴¹⁴Ibid; Anand Teltumbd , *Republic of Caste* (Navayana 2020).

⁴¹⁵ Amnesty International, "Justice Denied in Hathras: The Continued Failure to Protect Dalit Women" (2021) <https://www.amnesty.org> accessed 18 April 2025.

⁴¹⁶ Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (Permanent Black 2003).

Caste-Based Discrimination and Police Response in Villages (2009–2025)

Year	State/Village	Incident Description	Police Action	Discriminatory practices
2009	Uttar Pradesh, Bhagana	Dalits families denied access to water sources	No FIR filed	Caste based segregation
2013	Haryana, Mirjahpur	Dalits homes burned by dominant caste	Delayed arrests	Economic boycott, arson
2016	Gujarat, una	Dalits youth flogged for skinning cow	Slow judicial process	Cow vigilantism
2020	Bihar, Gaya	Dalits child denied mid-day meal with others	No disciplinary action	School segregation
2023	Tamil Nadu, Vengaiwasal	Dalits restricted from entering temple	No response from official	Religious exclusion
2025	Rajasthan, Baran	Dalits woman assaulted for drinking water	Pending investigation	Gendered caste violence

Explanation

Caste-Based Discrimination and Police Response (2009–2025)

Overall, these events identify entrenched caste discrimination and state failure to ensure protection, with education being an important factor in overcoming vulnerability. Still, lack of accountability in legal and police systems tends to dash hopes for Dalit justice.

This table provides a chronology of significant caste-based discriminatory events in various Indian states between 2009 and 2025. The information demonstrates how entrenched caste-based practices continue to exist in spite of legal systems designed to safeguard Dalits. It

also reveals a recurring pattern of inadequate or non-existent police responses, indicating entrenched institutional bias.

Bhagana (2009, Uttar Pradesh): Public water sources were denied to Dalit families, indicating denial of basic human rights. No FIR was registered, showing how customary caste discrimination gets normalized and dismissed by the law enforcement.⁴¹⁷

Mirchpur (2013, Haryana) : One of the most violent caste attacks in which dominant caste individuals set fire to Dalit houses, resulting in deaths and displacement. The police response

⁴¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, India: Hidden Apartheid – Caste Discrimination Against India's 'Untouchables' (2007) <https://www.hrw.org> accessed 18 April 2025.

was delayed, and economic boycott and arson were utilized as instruments of caste domination⁴¹⁸.

Una (2016, Gujarat) : Young Dalits were publicly beaten for participating in traditional leather work, illicitly equated with cow slaughter. The episode precipitated protests but the judicial process lingered, and no systemic changes were made, perpetuating cow vigilantism as caste arsenal.⁴¹⁹

Gaya (2020, Bihar): A Dalit boy was deprived of food with upper-caste students in the mid-day meal scheme, which indicated that even in welfare programs, discrimination takes place. There was no action against the perpetrator, reflecting administrative insensitivity.⁴²⁰

Vengaiwasal (2023, Tamil Nadu): Dalits were prevented from entering a temple, as is the tradition in denying them religious rights. No action was taken by officials, indicating that religious exclusion is institutionally tolerated.⁴²¹

Baran (2025 Rajasthan) : A Dalit woman was beaten up while fetching water from a shared source. The inquiry was still pending, depicting both gendered and caste violence, where Dalit women are the most exposed and least guarded.

In general, this table indicates that between 2009 and 2025, caste atrocities did not decrease—instead, they have transformed with new mechanisms of control and violence, frequently with police indifference or collusion. These trends indicate large implementation gaps in protective laws like the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and require institutional reforms, police accountability, and empowerment of communities.

⁴¹⁸ Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (Permanent Black 2003); Sukhadeo Thorat and Umakant (eds), *Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Society* (Rawat Publications 2004).

⁴¹⁹ Navayana Trust, *Caste, Faith, and Violence: A Compilation of Temple Entry Denials* (2023) <https://www.navayana.org> accessed 18 April 2025.

⁴²⁰ NCDHR, *Caste-Gender Atrocities Database: Rajasthan Case Files* (2025) <https://www.ncdhr.org.in> accessed 18 April 2025.

⁴²¹ NCDHR, *Caste-Gender Atrocities Database: Rajasthan Case Files* (2025) <https://www.ncdhr.org.in> accessed 18 April 2025.

DISCUSSION

Even now, discrimination based on caste is very prevalent in villages of India, and the largest problem is that people are not even conscious about their rights. People belonging to the Dalit community have to struggle for even their fundamental rights because there is no one to instruct or guide them. Because there is no education in the villages, people are generally not able to comprehend that what is being done to them is wrong. Unless told otherwise, they keep quiet. That is why it is imperative to raise awareness. Right from childhood itself, Dalit children are discriminated against in schools. Teachers handle them differently, don't sit close to them, and view them as weak or inferior. Even upper-caste children are taught the same at home and school, so they too carry on the same discrimination against Dalit children.⁴²² But if children are treated equally right from the start, they will study equally and know that caste does not determine a person's value. That is why reforms in the education system are needed. There should be laws so that teachers and students cannot discriminate against anyone on the basis of caste. Schools should have classes on legal rights and equality so that children learn from an early age that everyone is equal. Teachers should also be taught how to treat every student with equal respect. The government and NGOs must collaborate to conduct legal awareness and education campaigns in villages. Dalit women and youth must be educated about their rights and empowered so that they can raise their voices when injustice occurs. Only when people know their rights will they be able to assert themselves. Just enacting laws will not stop untouchability and caste violence in villages.⁴²³ Without reforming the education system, change is hard. Education must be structured so that it imparts equality, eradicates discrimination, and promotes awareness. That

⁴²² Anand Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva* (Navayana 2020).

⁴²³ Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine Newman, *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India* (OUP 2010).

is the only authentic and long-term solution for social reform to happen⁴²⁴

REFORM IN EDUCATION

To modify this condition, reforms within the education system are necessary. There must be laws so that no student or teacher discriminates anyone on the basis of caste. Schools must also have education about legal rights and equality so that children will learn to grow up knowing all people are equal. Teachers must undergo special training so that they treat every child with respect and fairness

REFORM IMPLEMENTATION

To combat caste-based discrimination and ensure equality in schools effectively, the education system has to be overhauled significantly. The first step has to be the inclusion of caste discrimination awareness in the school curriculum. This would include studying subjects that inform students about the evils of caste-based prejudice, the need for equality, and the laws aimed at the protection of oppressed groups, including the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. In addition to these legal subjects, the philosophy of social reformers such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who fought for the cause of Dalits, should find a place. Ambedkar's writing can give students a better insight into the social history and legal system that safeguards Dalits, which will create empathy, respect, and a sense of justice.⁴²⁵

Also, teachers, especially rural teachers, need to be trained on a regular basis to comprehend and address caste prejudice. Professional development workshops need to be held for the teachers so that they become sensitized towards the need for neutrality in the classroom. The training sessions would emphasize practical strategies for ensuring all students are treated equally regardless of their caste. This is particularly important in rural communities, where caste prejudices and

hierarchies tend to be deeper. Teachers must be provided with strategies for making their classrooms safe and welcoming spaces where students from all castes can feel respected and secure.⁴²⁶

The government, along with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), has to play an active role in raising awareness among rural communities regarding their legal rights. Awareness campaigns have to be conducted in villages, where legal professionals, social activists, and government officials can inform people about their rights as per laws such as the SC/ST Act, the Right to Education Act, and other related legal schemes. These drives serve to demystify legal procedure so that the marginalized communities understand how to have access to legal aid, bring complaints, and approach justice if needed. Having such awareness can help break cycles of oppression as Dalit households do not yet know their rights and legal privileges.⁴²⁷

There must be special committees or "Anti-Caste Discrimination Committees" in schools that work on keeping caste-based discrimination under surveillance. These committees would deal with complaint cases of caste discrimination and see to it that the educational environment remains free from discrimination. Maharashtra's example of setting up "Child Protection Committees" in 2023 to deal with problems related to caste and gender in schools can be emulated. These committees ought to be empowered to probe complaints, act swiftly, and hold perpetrators of discrimination accountable.⁴²⁸

In addition, extending financial aid and counseling to Dalit students is essential in preventing them from dropping out of school because of economic or social stress. Scholarships, stipends, and other financial

⁴²⁴ Ministry of Education, Government of India, Guidelines for the Prevention of Caste-Based Discrimination in Schools (2021).

⁴²⁵ Ministry of Education, Government of India, Guidelines on Prevention of Discrimination in Schools (2021).

⁴²⁶ UNICEF India, Ending Discrimination in Schools: A Teacher's Guide (2022) <https://www.unicef.org/india/reports> accessed 18 April 2025

⁴²⁷ National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), Curriculum Framework for Social Science Education (2022) <https://ncert.nic.in> accessed 18 April 2025.

⁴²⁸ Government of Maharashtra, Child Protection Committees in Schools (2023) Circular No. EDN/2023/23/CP

support mechanisms must be provided to enable Dalit students to pursue their studies without the encumbrance of economic hardship. The assistance should also encompass mentorship schemes, career guidance, and orientation on accessing higher education opportunities. Through reducing the economic costs of education, these reforms will end the cycle of poverty and discrimination that confronts many Dalit students.⁴²⁹

In summary, to be effective, reforms must be holistic. This must involve a mix of changes in educational curricula, teacher training, awareness campaigns, community mobilization, and scholarships for Dalit students. It is only through these multifaceted measures that we can aspire to have an education system that promotes equality, dignity, and justice for all students, irrespective of caste.

Real Life Step Towards Social Justice In Rural India

All over India, some grassroots efforts have shown the right ways of instilling caste equality. In the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu, the "School for Equality" provided an environment that had children of all castes attending school together and had zero complaints of caste bias. In Jharkhand, the campaign of legal literacy empowered Dalit women with knowledge about their rights, resulting in more participation legally.⁴³⁰ Maharashtra implemented Child Protection Committees within schools to resolve caste and gender-related problems, enhancing student safety and inclusion. Gujarat experienced Dalit youth activism and legal literacy initiatives after the 2016 Una flogging. In Bihar, a WhatsApp-based legal helpline allowed Dalits to lodge complaints of caste violence and claim justice anonymously. These programs demonstrate how education, legal consciousness, and participatory governance

can effectively counter caste-based discrimination in rural regions⁴³¹.

The Ongoing Reality Of Caste Based Violence and the Failure of Legal Protection

Even now, in the year 2024, caste violence is still a cruel fact of life in most villages of Uttar Pradesh and rural India. Dalits continue to be charged with baseless offenses, beaten, belittled, and in countless tearful instances, lynched in the open by upper-caste gangs. The old pattern of false charges of cattle theft or cow slaughter being a deadly provocation repeats.⁴³² In many such instances, the actual perpetrators are from the ruling caste, but the onus is intentionally shifted to a Dalit individual, usually the poorest and most vulnerable in the village. Even with laws such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, justice for Dalits is agonizingly elusive in reality. Police usually refuse to register FIRs, or procrastinate, particularly when the accused are politically influential or belong to dominant caste groups. Ministers and local officials usually remain mute or complicit, turning a blind eye to the violence.⁴³³ This failure of the legal system reinforces the feeling of helplessness among Dalits. Most Dalit households in rural areas continue to be deprived of access to drinking water, barred from entering temples, or evicted from their homes on the basis of intimidation by the dominant castes. These are not one-off events – these are a part of daily life for most Dalits in rural India. The structural inequity is so entrenched that laws by themselves, in the absence of social and political will, are found wanting.⁴³⁴

⁴²⁹ Nitin Tagade, Sukhadeo Thorat and Ajaya K Naik, 'Discrimination and Exclusion in Schools: A Study on Dalit Children' (2015) 50(2) Economic and Political Weekly 44.

⁴³⁰ 'Caste discrimination in 30% TN schools: Survey' The Times of India (Chennai, 19 October 2023)

⁴³¹ Maharashtra to become first state to prepare child policy for 5 vulnerable categories' Mumbai Live (Mumbai, 2 August 2023)

⁴³² Human Rights Watch, "Broken System: Dysfunction, Abuse and Impunity in the Indian Police" (HRW, 2009)

⁴³³ Christophe Jaffrelot and Kalaiyarasan A, Justice and Caste Violence in India: Why Impunity Prevails (EPW Engage, 2023)

⁴³⁴ The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989.

Ending Caste Based Discrimination In Rural India

Eliminating Caste Based Discrimination In Rural India Strict Enforcement of SC/ST Atrocities Act: The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 has been a valuable legal instrument for eliminating caste violence, but its enforcement is weak, particularly in rural India. To enact the law more effectively, there must be strict enforcement of its provisions to the extent that FIRs (First Information Reports) are filed forthwith when complaints are lodged. Police personnel refusing to register cases or withholding them should be criminally prosecuted. Provision for special fast-track courts for caste atrocities can assist in providing quick justice.⁴³⁵ Such courts must be equipped with expert judges who have learned to interpret the intricacies of caste discrimination. Further,

expert judges who have learned to interpret the intricacies of caste discrimination. Further, these courts charges as appropriate. Police have to implement a community policing strategy, where there is interaction between police officers and local Dalit communities to foster mutual trust. These police officers have to engage in criminal investigations alone but also become involved in de-escalating caste tensions through peaceful coexistence⁴³⁶

Enabling Dalit communities through grassroots legal awareness is imperative to fight caste-based discrimination in rural India. Most Dalits are not aware of their rights under laws such as the SC/ST Act, Right to Education Act, and the Prevention of Atrocities Act. Legal awareness camps, conducted by NGOs, law schools, and government agencies, can bridge this gap. Mobile legal aid teams must be formed to access rural areas, providing legal advice, educational material, and tips for accessing the justice system. NGOs can also intervene by sensitizing Dalit women and youth, utilizing

workshops, social media, and outreach among communities to increase awareness⁴³⁷

To provide sustained accountability, independent community monitoring organizations must be established in every village. These would monitor cases of caste violence, assess implementation of government schemes, and serve as mediators between victims and police. Keeping close records and undergoing periodic audits would enable identification of systemic problems and pressure for more effective enforcement. Moreover, real empowerment also calls for greater Dalit representation in local government.⁴³⁸ Legal provisions for reservations in Panchayats are in place, but they are often rendered ineffective by manipulation at the hands of dominant castes. Empowering and training Dalit candidates would make them more effective leaders and ensure that their voices are heard. Greater Dalit leadership in village councils would directly address discrimination, call for accountability, and encourage inclusive policies. Finally, a convergence of legal enforcement, mass mobilization, and inclusive governance is needed to break entrenched caste hierarchies and to ensure justice for the poor⁴³⁹

Conclusion

The continuation of untouchability and caste discrimination in rural India reflects a profound disconnect between legal provisions and social reality. As noted in the discussion, legislation alone—like the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act—is not enough without awareness, education, and accountability. School discrimination, inaction by police, and absence of legal literacy among Dalits continue to undermine the law's strength. Thus, effective reform must be multi-faceted: reinforcing legal enforcement, educational reform to advance equality, and empowering Dalit communities

⁴³⁵ The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989.

⁴³⁶ Human Rights Watch, "Broken System: Dysfunction, Abuse and Impunity in the Indian Police" (2009)

⁴³⁷ Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), Community Policing in India: A Model Framework (CHRI 2020)

⁴³⁸ National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), Legal Aid to Marginalized Communities (2022)

⁴³⁹ Dalit Arthik Adhikar Andolan, Monitoring Caste-Based Atrocities in Villages: Toolkit (2023)



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through awareness and representation. Genuine change will only be achieved when law and society collaborate to eliminate caste hierarchies from the bottom up.

